

# **“The Physiological Effects of Capital Executions”**

**by Colonel Émile Duhousset**

ANTHROPOLOGY SOCIETY OF PARIS

Meeting of November 18, 1880

**Robert K. Stevenson: Translator and Editor**



Yataghan with ornamental sheath

## **“The Physiological Effects of Capital Executions”**

Messieurs, as you recall, at our last meeting a prolonged and learned discussion with regard to a vile criminal took place. During this discussion I asked if in the case of asphyxia and luxation, which spontaneously occur in the most absolute way under the guillotine, the condemned is not in a state of revolt followed by stupor capable of causing an inflammation, overtaking his sickly paroxysm at the moment when the spinal marrow is sectioned; and, resulting from this violent commotion is not a bloody discharge from the brain produced?

Indeed, I believe we will perhaps ascertain to a greater degree a case of fulminating apoplexy if the retributive blade is allowed to be stopped halfway on its journey. Now, I shall pose another question: when death is produced mechanically, might not the resulting commotion and asphyxia engender disorders of which the mass of the brain bears traces?

As all organs of a living animal are subordinate to the brain, it follows that moral sensations have an influence over natural functions. In fact, is not the reciprocal also in effect? Each day we see proof of this in the most ordinary details of daily life: heat, cold, hunger and so on modify the way in which we appreciate things. A young soldier, I have often witnessed, can have the most stable disposition and yet be physically indisposed by the effect produced on him by the first volley of grapeshot sailing over his head; additionally, I have seen the same disorder suddenly manifest itself upon a man of proven and energetic character, by means of the simple delivery of a telegram.

I would like to share with you some observations drawn from my assignments in Persia and my military career, whose contingencies have permitted me to be a witness to all sorts of violent deaths; I shall not discuss here the particularities of certain Persian forms of corporal punishment, as such will not add anything to the question I've formulated.

The passage from life to death, in the case that presently occupies us, of an individual who reaches a state of paroxysm from being terror-stricken due to the progression of terrible anticipated circumstances, does a similar method of execution leave any trace on the brain of a Moslem man to whom death, also by the blade of the law, only offers to him the image of his being delivered to the gates of paradise of Mohammed? Those who like

myself have viewed Moslems dying are able to express doubt that such a trace will be found.

To justify the point I am advancing, I shall now relate two examples that tend to establish the existence of a difference on two brains, one of which presents signs of a violent struggle, while the other submitted tranquilly to a prompt annihilation.

Firstly, the day after the Battle of Woerth, I saw and studied some extraordinary cases of muscular contractility in individuals whose vital principle had been suddenly done away with, observing these in interlacings of cadavers who had conserved for 24 hours their last gestures of fright and resistance at the moment when death had seized them.



French army at the Battle of Woerth (August 6, 1870)

Secondly, one morning in Persia, being at the camp of the Sultan, I saw reposing near a stream some men whose demeanor attracted my attention. They were six prisoners; three had their legs inside a cangue, a triangular-shaped heavy wooden collar used throughout the Orient; the other three knelt down in succession and the executioner, lifting up each one's beard, quietly slit their throats by cutting the trachea artery with a pocketknife.

When it was the last one's turn, the executioner paused an instant in order to sharpen the knife's cutting edge, rubbing it on a band of hide which hung from his belt; during this critical waiting period, the condemned man responded with the greatest calm to a trivial question.

None of the condemned ever complained or protested. There were, by chance, four or five onlookers present, but no guards or assistants. It only took a few minutes in order to make these three into cadavers. The other seated prisoners looked on and one of them signaled to me that tomorrow it would be his turn.

At the moment of death, I have, in fact, observed almost a smile on the features of Persians. For instance, twelve hours after the execution, when I sketched the three dead men lying as they were left on the ground in their final bodily position, each one's visage maintained the appearance of great placidity. I recall remarking on this the same day to my companion and friend, Doctor Tholozan, comparing this state of the face with the one that results from French executions.

In Africa, I should mention, death sentences are performed on the natives who also endure them with the greatest submission.

Now, in earlier times throughout a large part of the Orient the head was cut off with a yataghan, and often the executioner demanded the condemned to lift up or bend his head—in a word, to well position it for his prompt beheading; the beheading was then carried out by the executioner without the least emotion and as the accomplishment of the most ordinary act of life. Doctor Bonnafond, who during a long medical career in Africa made numerous observations on the Arabs, will certainly corroborate my statement.

It is not necessary to cite others on this matter; everyone can give an account, like me, of events that enter into the domain of surprise, or more or less violent shock. In short, my discussion today has dealt in part with the unhealthy, frightful state of mind that seizes many condemned criminals just before their imminent execution. Can we therefore not say that capital punishment, by itself, will contribute something to the manifestation of this abnormal mental state?

To conclude, messieurs, I shall pose one additional question: has there also not been good reason for me to bestow special attention on the facts

relating to the nature of those who I have seen to describe (that is, Moslems) and who at first glance appear not to figure in the course of the debate? I shall leave that to your best determination.